World Chronicle

UNITED NATIONS

PROGRAMME: No. 776 recorded 21 December 1999

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RACISM AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

In 1997, the United Nations General Assembly decided to convene the Third World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. Fittingly, the Conference will take place in South Africa, in the year 2001. The decision to hold this Conference reflects the growing international concern about the rise in the incidents of intolerance, and recognition of the challenges and opportunities in combating this phenomena in an increasingly globalized world. In this **World Chronicle** episode, Bacre Waly Ndiaye, Director of the New York Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, discusses some of the issues to be raised at the forthcoming Conference.

WORLD CHRONICLE is produced by the Media Division, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, NY 10017, U.S.A.

Duration:	28:03"
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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

In recent years, the world has witnessed campaigns of ethnic cleansing and genocide, with racial minorities and immigrants becoming targets of intolerance. Millions of human beings continue to be victims of racism and racial discrimination. They continue to encounter discrimination solely due to the colour of their skin or other factors that indicate the race to which they belong. Preparations are now underway to hold the Third World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in South Africa in 2001. The convening of this World Conference has been preceded by fifty years by the United Nations in its efforts to eradicate all racism and racial discrimination.

Our guest today is an expert in the field of human rights. He is Bacre Waly Ndiaye, Director of the New York Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Joining me to talk with Mr. Ndiaye are Thalif Deen of *InterPress Service* and Betsy Pisik of *The Washington Times*.

Mr. Ndiaye, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

Mr. Ndiaye, I'm sure the idea of a world conference is admirable and you can hardly have picked a better place for it; South Africa, after its generations of apartheid which has recently been alleviated although, I believe, there's still a good deal of racial discrimination in that country. But one wonders how effective a conference, or any endeavour really, to focus attention on this problem can really be. It seems to me that nature is discriminatory. When I watch like the bird feeder my own little place in the country the woodpeckers are attacking the nut hatchers and the nu thatchers are attacking the chickadees. And it seems about the only animals that do not discriminate are dogs where a tiny dog recognizes a huge dog as another dog and part of the same dog family. But human beings and birds, and maybe bees, don't seem to get that message. How is the World Conference going to change that?

NDIAYE: I believe that the main issue about racism is awareness and education and the question of racism not only is a kind of break, strong break, to our willingness at the United Nations to provide all the human rights for all, but also because it has been recognized as a source of media conflicts – wars – and a kind of aggravating factor to poverty and all of those issues. So that's why it is important to try to know where we stand and to

improve our fight against racism.

LITTLEJOHNS: And what's going to come out of this conference? Are you going to adopt a declaration, new guidelines for resolving problems of racism and racial discrimination?

NDIAYE: I think that it will be the first major conference of the next century and it's also the first one which will not be dominated by apartheid. So it just gives opportunity for everybody to just try to recognize the phenomenon of racism – why we have racism and how to fight racism – because as I said it is one of the most serious impediments to the enjoyment of human rights.

LITTLEJOHNS: Where racism is concerned there seems to be a tendency to think more of racism in terms of Whites and Blacks, Blacks and Whites, of course, because there's reverse racism too. But there are many forms of racism. I mean I believe that Japan is a major contributor to this conference but there's a good deal of racism in Japan. A lot of Japanese hate the Koreans and it's not easy to immigrate into Japan, if possible at all. So Japan is not exactly a shining example of an absence of racism so I mean it's pretty much a universal problem, isn't it?

NDIAYE: It's a universal problem because that's the reason why we use racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance which include anti-Semitism and Negrophobia as has been indicated, or Arabophobia. So it's every form of discrimination on the basis of origin because you can't change your origin. And we had hoped that with the progress of science and the progress of technology and globalization people would recognize that we are all the same. But it's not what is happening. We have a new form of racism which has led to conflicts in Europe, in Africa, in Asia – everywhere in fact. And racism is an aggravating factor of discrimination against women, against the poor, against immigrants, against asylum seekers or refugees.

DEEN: The UN decision to hold this conference, which you described as a major conference, it comes at a time when the United States has called for a moratorium on all world conferences and their argument is we've had about nine conferences since 1990 but most of the recommendations of these conferences have not been implemented for want of funds. How different will your conference be from the other nine conferences?

NDIAYE: Well, I'm not sure that the nine conferences that have preceded this one have been useless. You can ask the women whether Beijing has been useless or ...

LITTLEJOHNS: What conference was that?

NDIAYE: Beijing.

LITTLEJOHNS: The Women's Conference in Beijing.

NDIAYE: Yes. That one is an example. But I believe, as I said, it has been recognized even in this country – I was three months ago travelling to South Africa and I was reading the news in *The New York Times* that racism and discrimination on the grounds of ethnic origin have been recognized as a major issue for the next century in this country by the public. And, in addition, I believe that it's really one of the focuses of the administration's policy – it's "one nation" I believe is the slogan – and there have been many studies...

LITTLEJOHNS: The Clinton Administration policy in the United States?

NDIAYE: Yes, yes, in the United States. And I believe that it's not only here. But just to give you an example, the Special Rapporteur has been to Indonesia, has been to India, has been to France, to the United Kingdom and also investigating the fate of the gypsies in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, I believe. And he has been to South Africa, as well and has been to Colombia, into Kuwait, so it's a universal problem. And it's just totally unfair and not acceptable that human beings are prevented from enjoying their rights because of the colour of their skin or because of their background.

DEEN: How are you planning to get the funding for this conference, particularly when the UN is going through a financial crisis?

NDIAYE: Well, this conference will be funded by voluntary funds and for the time being we do not have a lot of money. I must say that we only have approximately $700,000 available.

LITTLEJOHNS: How can you run a conference ...

NDIAYE: From the voluntary funds. That's the reason why the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mrs. Robinson, who is the Secretary-General of the World Conference, is trying to raise awareness of all contributors. And we hope this will involve the business sector as well to make the world conference a success.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mrs. Mary Robinson, the former President of Ireland.

NDIAYE: The High Commissioner for Human Rights.

PISIK: How do you anticipate needing for the conference?

NDIAYE: I must say I don't exactly have the budget but it is clear that $700,000

will not get us anywhere. And what we hope also is to encourage the organization of regional conferences and we have one scheduled in Strasbourg in October for the Council on Europe and another is volunteered by Brazil for the Latin America region.

PISIK: Mr. Ndiaye, most nations have laws that outlawed discrimination. They have in many cases constitutions that say that this is an unacceptable behaviour and we all know it exists. So what can you hope to accomplish for the conference on a global level, even at the local level? This doesn't seem very effective.

NDIAYE: Well, I must say that the most difficult problem with racism is the denial of its existence. In many societies people don't recognize that there are racists and mostly when you have discrimination on the grounds of ethnic origin or other factors which are not necessarily linked to the colour of the skin, but just the same in nature. And we hope by raising the level of awareness, by encouraging education for children, especially by drawing attention on the fate of people who are, let's say, multiple victims because if you are at the same time a woman, an immigrant, and a different colour, you are in trouble in many countries. So there are a number of silent tragedies going on because of racism and related discrimination so we hope to encourage mobilization on this issue and to make it very much the fight of everybody including NGOs, non-governmental organizations, and including every sector of society.

LITTLEJOHNS: But it seems that the theme of the conference is not confined to racism or racial discrimination but includes xenophobia. What can you do about xenophobia? I mean we have seen plenty of that in the Balkans and we have seen other examples of it. For instance the British and the French they are not too crazy about each other and the same thing could be said about various other European groups. What can you do about these things? I mean they're built into the culture, the history of countries.

NDIAYE: Unfortunately, xenophobia is not limited to Europe. We have seen some cases of massive proportions of different populations in Africa, for instance, because of xenophobia. But you realize–

LITTLEJOHNS: Tribal things, you mean?

NDIAYE: No, xenophobia. Foreigners. If you are a foreigner you have to get out of the country, or you are too rich. Or they can be other African groups, they can be people from Asia. We have seen the Indians in Uganda. There are some cases of xenophobia against the Middle Easterns in West Africa. So it's a serious problem. And the question is –

as long as it lead to humanitarian catastrophes and into wars and if you want to prevent war, which is our ambition at the UN, if you want to eradicate poverty, if you want to ensure enjoyment of human rights, minimum basic needs of peoples, we have to fight it.

DEEN: When you talk of others how does the UN propose to fight the increasing racism on the information superhighway – the Internet? Have you been tackling this at all?

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Ndiaye, before you answer that – this is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Bacre Waly Ndiaye, Director of the New York Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Yes, Mr. Ndiaye.

NDIAYE: It has been quite striking to see that the debate this year at the General Assembly on human rights and the issue of racism has been dominated by the Internet because they realize that there are a number of Internet sites trying to revive Nazism...

DEEN: Hate groups – neo-Nazis.

NDIAYE: Hate groups – neo-Nazis. You can have not only the message but you have some people also trying to address issues against Muslims, or against Blacks, or against Whites or against Jews. And it's a matter of concern because as I said, globalization should have brought more understanding. Sometimes, it's the other way around. But the media are also a very important factor to try to counter this trend and to try to bring to every family, to every home a better standard, a better yardstick for human behaviour.

PISIK: One of the things I'm wondering in leafing through the goals of the conference is how you would reconcile these goals with restrictions on freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom of opinion. Is there much of a conflict there as you see it?

NDIAYE: I must say that in some countries freedom of expression or opinion is absolute and people believe that by restricting expressions of racist views you are suppressing somebody's constitutional right. But in fact go back to the United Nations, UNESCO has recognized that freedom of expression does not extend to expressions of hatred. And both in the Balkans and in Rwanda, the conflicts which have led to genocide and ethnic cleansing have been, let's say, prepared by intense radio/ tv campaigns to vilify, to what they say devilize – I don't know how to call it ....

LITTLEJOHNS: Demonize.

NDIAYE: Demonize the others, to strip them of their human dignity, even

human nature in order to prepare their extermination. So it's very important, in my view, to fight the expression of hatred and racism.

LITTLEJOHNS: Thalif mentioned the Internet but surely a lot can be done with radio and television to carry the message that discrimination is a very, very bad thing and that people are very stupid to continue to pursue it, to practice it. Is your conference, or the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, are they doing anything to bring on board the media to pursue this message?

NDIAYE: Oh we think that the media is essential, absolutely essential, for the conference and even generally for human rights because, as I said, we are all the same. But to say others are not human beings and they deserved to be killed, they deserved to be expelled, they deserved to be tortured is something that's just not understandable in a way. But on the other hand, if nothing is done to try to stop this we will expose people to more human rights violations. And, to my view, education, the media and trying to diffuse this racist stereotype, because stereotyping is a channel of racism, and we hope that by sharing cultures, by encouraging diversity, encouraging tolerance, we can help.

DEEN: The UN, over the years, has placed a very high priority on human rights and the UN's regular budget is about 1.2 or 1.4 billion dollars per year. But I'm told, they earmark only about 40 million dollars annually for human rights. Is this correct?

NDIAYE: Usually, we have a little bit over between one and two percent of the budget.

DEEN: That's all?

NDIAYE: Which is very, very, very little. I must say, symbolically, this year, we saw some increase in the human rights budget whereas the other budgets were frozen. So it's just an indication of awareness and willingness to change little by little this situation, but it's absolutely not acceptable.

DEEN: Is there a move by certain countries to prevent any increase in your budget?

NDIAYE: I must say that the reluctance to give resources to human rights is a factor here. We have to deal with that. But little by little I believe that by unfortunate example we are able to show that human rights protection is the best prevention of war which is the worst situation one can live in.

PISIK: You mentioned that this is the third conference on racial discrimination. I'm wondering can you tell us a little about the first two? Has there been

much progress in this time?

NDIAYE: The first two were in 1973 and 1988 but as I said, they were dominated by two factors. One was the apartheid problem, the other the Israeli-Palestinian problem and one has now realized that one of the biggest successes of the century was the end of apartheid and to have Nelson Mandela coming back from jail, from this Robbins Island prison, and preaching tolerance, reconciliation is something which we cannot forget. And the other problem is the Israeli-Palestinian problem which is now making progress towards settlement. So it is the first time that we'll have the opportunity to have a global view of racism because it was hiding the other forms of racism which are not less dangerous.

DEEN: About six months before your world conference there is going to be a millennium summit in September in New York. More than one hundred heads of states are expected. The Secretary-General had proposed an agenda which included human rights but I'm told that human rights has now been dropped and globalization has been added. Don't you think this will undermine your world conference?

NDIAYE: Well, first of all, you can remember that this Millennium Assembly is under the symbol of diversity of dialogue among cultures and civilization. This is very much what we need to combat racism. And also I believe that now we have a more global approach to human rights which is not only, let's say, the civil and political rights but also economic, social rights, including globalization. I believe that after what happened in Seattle no one will say that human rights are foreign to globalization anymore.

DEEN: So human rights should be a part of globalization?

NDIAYE: I believe that human rights are already mainstream, if I can use this word, in all aspects of United Nations work. We are trying to do it anyhow.

PISIK: It's impossible for the UN to criticize individual member states or governments, is that going to be much of a problem? Is that going to impact on the ability to create this document to point out examples? Is that going to ease collaboration or confuse things?

NDIAYE: It depends on what you call the UN. The UN is not limited to the Secretariat. You know that there are the independent experts, the rapporteurs and also the treaty bodies like the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. And also you know that it does not prevent even part of the Secretariat from publishing reports on situations in the world. I believe that commitment to human rights is – again the debates this year is whether it should be limited by borders – national borders. I don't think that is the

case. That's my own view on that but I believe it doesn't prevent us from addressing national situations, but of course it has different ways to do it.

LITTLEJOHNS: Do you foresee at the conference, Mr. Ndiaye, some finger-pointing among the delegates to the conference? One delegate may criticize and another who, himself or herself, has been criticized for discrimination, and so forth. I recall that some years ago at the time of apartheid there was a long debate in the UN Security Council. South Africa was in the dock, so to speak, on the question of apartheid and the South African Foreign Minister came and accused all the Northern European countries who were wringing their hands about apartheid of practising a form of apartheid themselves. He specifically attacked the Swedish government for tolerating discrimination against the Lappish people near the Arctic Circle, inside the Arctic Circle, and so on. Is this the kind of thing that can happen at the conference?

NDIAYE: The conference is not meant to be country-specific but thematic : what's the relationship between racism and discrimination and slavery and globalization; what are the historical factors explaining racism; what are the social factors; what do we do with the asylum seekers, the refugees. How about women migrants, in addition to that ,and how to bring another message to the children. These are the kinds of issues which need to be discussed. Of course, we'll certainly have some examples, cases, because you cannot work outside the realities but the focus is not finger-pointing at countries' situations but to understand better in order to fight racism in the 21st century.

DEEN: As part of the promotion of human rights, there has been a long-standing proposal for an international conference on migration. What's the status of this conference?

NDIAYE: Well, I don't know exactly about this conference but I know that the convention for the protection of migrant workers and their families has been only signed by about 12-13 countries. So it is the one which is having the slowest progress among the international covenants, internationally promoted ones. And we hope to promote this very important convention.

DEEN: Is the UN promoting this convention?

NDIAYE: Oh yes, oh yes, and it's part of their promotion. But for the time being, we have very little success but anyhow, through this conference also, I would say, migrant workers would be one of the themes because it is one of the new forms of racial discrimination.

LITTLEJOHNS: How many countries do you expect to attend the conference?

NDIAYE: All, I hope.

LITTLEJOHNS: All Member States – all 188 Member States?

NDIAYE: Why yes. And also, you see, we'll certainly be a kind of non-governmental organization forum because they are mobilizers themselves. They're having seminars, there has been research. I just received a report from the International Council on Human Rights Policy two months ago.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Ndiaye, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Bacre Waly Ndiaye, Director of the New York Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. He was interviewed by Thalif Deen of *InterPress Service* and Betsy Pisik of *The Washington Times*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**

ANNOUNCER: Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to **World Chronicle**, United Nations, Room S-827L, New York, N.Y., 10017.

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